

MARC-ANDRÉ HAMELIN

PIANO

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Symphony world premiere brings together a virtuoso pianist and an ambitious composer

Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic **Tuesday, November 14, 2006**

Composer Kevin Volans' new piano concerto, "Atlantic Crossing," is scheduled for its world premiere in Davies Symphony Hall on Wednesday night, and as with any such project, there are still wrinkles and uncertainties to be worked out. But there's one thing that both Volans and soloist Marc-André Hamelin can assert with utter confidence.

The piece is a killer.

"What Kevin told me when we started to work on this was, 'Above all, I don't want to cause you physical injury,' " Hamelin recalled during a joint interview last week. "And when I first got the score I was concerned, because it's quite difficult at tempos that are really extreme."

Volans agreed that the concerto "pushes the limits of playability." He began his career as a pianist, and admitted, with a sheepish grin, that while writing the concerto he kept thinking, "Thank heavens I don't have to play the thing myself."

He added, "I did put in some simple passages, but they're quite short. And in the end, I couldn't ignore the fact that I had a great, virtuoso pianist at my disposal. I mean, I could have written an exquisite, very sight-readable adagio, but in that case I could play it myself — and why would I need him?"

"Atlantic Crossing" was commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony, and this week's premiere brings together the orchestra and Music Director Michael Tilson Thomas with Hamelin, the brilliant and omnivorous pianist who makes an overdue Symphony debut after a string of extraordinary local recitals under the auspices of San Francisco Performances.

The impetus for the project came from Volans, who was eager to write another in the series of concertos that has occupied him for the past decade or so. He and Thomas have the same management, and Hamelin came recommended on the strength of his voluminous discography for the Hyperion label.

"I was a huge fan of his playing," Volans said, "and, for me, the greatest pleasure in writing music is actually working with musicians."

"That's nice," Hamelin said. "Because not all composers feel that way,"

Composer and soloist make an odd and interesting couple. Volans, 57, grew up in South Africa, studied in Europe and is now a naturalized Irish citizen. Wiry and vague, he darted in and out of the conversation, raising his eyebrows apologetically and punctuating his conversation with self-effacing giggles.

Hamelin, 45, is a more stolid, physically imposing figure, one who might easily instill fear in a defenseless piano. He was raised in Montreal but has lived in Philadelphia for so long that any trace of Quebec has vanished from his speech.

But the two seem to agree on the importance of the Romantic tradition in writing new music — for all its knotty challenges, "Atlantic Crossing" promises to partake in the line of virtuoso concertos going back more than a century.

"For me, this is a retrospective piece, historically," Volans said. "I decided to indulge my love of piano

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music."

That nod to the past is the latest in a string of artistic reorientations that has marked the composer's career. Trained as a serialist, Volans turned away from that school in the 1980s to explore African traditions.

"White Man Sleeps," his 1986 string quartet for the Kronos Quartet, remains one of his best-known works, although its abiding popularity is a source of mild annoyance to him now. But in addition to bringing his name before an international audience, the piece also taught him a valuable lesson about the practicalities of performance.

"The first version of that piece was for two harpsichords and a viola da gamba in African tuning, and it was a very successful piece, but of course it was hardly ever done. But as soon as you do it for string quartet, there are literally thousands of performances, and I thought, 'Well, why didn't anyone tell me? A standard ensemble is clearly the sensible way to go.' "

Since then, Volans has written nine more string quartets, as well as concertos for cello, two violins and piano trio. He's collaborated with choreographers and visual artists, and together with the late Australian writer Bruce Chatwin composed a chamber opera about the final months in the life of Arthur Rimbaud.

His fond awareness of Romantic tradition dovetails perfectly with Hamelin's. "My favorite period is the latter half of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th, the period where tonal harmony started to break up," Hamelin said. "And just as in that music, the concept of virtuosity here extends beyond just the physical demands — you also have to wrap your head around the harmonic language, and delineate the arc of the piece so that it's not just a series of episodes.

"In my mind, virtuosity has a much more noble meaning than the general public thinks. It's not just a kind of extreme physical display. It's an artful marshaling of all the means at your disposal — mental, spiritual, corporeal."

Anyone who's heard Hamelin in performance or on record will recognize this confluence of virtues — his playing is at once athletic and tender, sensitive and brilliant.

And in addition to his formidable keyboard technique, Hamelin has appointed himself the advocate for a host of rarely heard composers, including Nicolas Medtner, Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji, Charles Alkan, Nikolay Roslavets and Nikolay Kapustin, as well as more familiar figures like Scriabin, Albéniz and Ives. A recent enthusiasm is the improbably named Pancho Vladigerov, whom he describes as "the Sibelius of Bulgaria." Hamelin credits his love of obscure repertoire to his father, an amateur pianist who subscribed to a monthly piano magazine that reprinted the first pages of new publications.

"That was my first exposure to something new, and when I started winning scholarship competitions at 14 or 15 and had some money in my pockets, I began spending it on scores. That's how I discovered people like Stockhausen and Boulez and Cage, as well as composers like Scriabin and Villa-Lobos that had escaped my dad's attention."

Hamelin still describes himself as "a compulsive sheet-music collector," but his attention has turned away from the music of living composers.

"If I really went in that direction, I would, in good conscience, have to go all the way. And once you're branded a new-music specialist, you're expected to play a role in bridging the gap between composers and audiences. I couldn't do that — I'm too much in love with the past."

"Oh dear," Volans interjected. "You're going to break so many hearts!"

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